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Narrative logic. A semantic analysis of the historian's language

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Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

Publication date:

1981

[Link to publication in University of Groningen/UMCG research database](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Ankersmit, F. R. (1981). *Narrative logic. A semantic analysis of the historian's language*. s.n.

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CHAPTER I.

PRELIMINARIES

(I) *Introductory Remarks.* This book will be an inquiry into the logical structure of narrative historiography (the term “logical” should be understood in a broad sense so as to include the domain of “philosophical logic”)¹. Narrative historiography as it is and was and not historiography as it ought to be will be the subject of this analysis. I shall not specify rules for the writing of history with the intention of changing historiography for the better. Historiography as it now is seems to me to produce an unexceptionable, though quite particular kind of knowledge and in my opinion those who think otherwise are usually insufficiently aware of the solid logical structure of historical language. For is not historiography intelligible to us all, even if we do not know why it is satisfactory to us? The philosopher of history who is dissatisfied with narrative historiography because he cannot explain why it is intelligible to him, has translated his own lack of insight into the nature of narrative historiography into a critique of the discipline he investigates. And that is not the way one should proceed in the philosophy of history.

One might object, however, that specifying the rules for the writing of history is tantamount to assuming a normative position, because such rules always state how history *ought* to be written. But I think that this would overstress the meaning of the word “normative”. We simply cannot say that narrative history ought to be written in conformity with these logical rules, for this would imply that there are historical narratives in which these rules are not obeyed. And this cannot be the case. Someone who systematically breaks the rules of arithmetic is no longer practising arithmetic.

Our inquiry will be limited to written texts. That is to say, historical films or plays will be excluded from the present investigation. A film or a play is constructed in such a way as to give the spectator the impression of being present at the scene of action. The spectator fulfils the rôle of a passive participant. Therefore, the representation of historical social reality offered by historical films or plays is not yet structured within a narrative frame. This is not contradicted by the fact that writers of plays or producers of films often try to make it as easy as possible for the spectator to proceed from just seeing the play or the film to giving it a narrative interpretation. Only when this step is taken, e.g. when we write down what happened in a particular play or film, is there a narrative structure. In short, historical plays or films can be interpreted as, or translated into, narrative structures, but they do not have such structures themselves. And even the fact that such films or

1. In the introduction to P.P. Strawson, *Philosophical logic*, Oxford 1973 Strawson defines the subject-matter of philosophical logic.

plays may be dramatizations of written (historiographical) narratives makes no difference.

But what about the scripts for these films or plays? Shouldn't we regard these scripts as historiographical narratives? Consider a department of history that investigates only texts written or spoken by people in the past — one could think of intellectual history or the history of philosophy. The analogy with the scripts is obvious: in both cases we are concerned with the actual words used by people in the past. Imagine a piece of historical writing that consists only of quotations from the works of one or more philosophers. Such a series of quotations may result from — or strongly suggest — an ordering of these quotations within a narrative frame, but — and this is essential — it is not such a narrative frame itself. Therefore, no narrative historiography can consist exclusively of quotations. And we may conclude that we should not regard scripts of historical films or plays as historiographical narratives.

When I say that this book will be concerned with the logical structure of historical narrative, I claim both too little and too much. As for the “too little”: what will be said in the subsequent chapters has, no doubt, considerable bearing upon *all* narrative (that is, not only the historical) use of language as we find it for instance in novels, journals, textbooks and so on. It seems a reasonable assumption that historical language is the prototype of all narrative *genres*: only after human beings had acquired the ability to speak about their personal or collective past did myth, poetry and fiction become possible. Our past is the best matrix for learning how to arrange statements on reality in a consistent way. We can conclude that the philosophy of history, and, more specifically, narrativist philosophy will also be of fundamental importance for linguistics and the study of literature and fiction.

The “too much” in my claim requires a more elaborate explanation. In German and Dutch philosophy of history a distinction is often made between “*geschiedsvorsing*” and “*geschiedschrijving*”², i.e. between “historical research” and the “narrative writing of history”. The term “historical research” refers to the historian's desire to establish the facts of the historical process with a maximum of exactitude. When the historian does his historical research we can compare him with Collingwood's well-known detective who wishes to find the murderer of John Doe³: he wants to know what actually happened, who did or wrote what, how texts should be interpreted and so on. A number of “auxiliary sciences” (of which *modern* socio-economic history is the most conspicuous) have been evolved to assist the historian in his attempt to establish the facts. But a historian is essentially more than a “fact-finder” or a detective. Getting to know the facts is only a preliminary phase in the task he sets himself.

2. Huizinga, p. 110; the same distinction has been made by Elton in his *G.R. Elton, The practice of history*, London 1967, pp. 160 ff. See also H.I. Marrou, *De la connaissance historique*, Paris 1973, p. 30.

3. Collingwood (I), p.274 ff.

For his real problem is how to integrate these facts into a consistent historical narrative. Obviously, this is what I called the “narrative writing of history”.

I am quite aware that for various well-known reasons which need not be repeated here, it is impossible to draw a sharp line between historical research and the narrative writing of history. Of course, facts are generally only looked for and described within a specific frame of narrative interpretation. On the other hand, facts are to a considerable degree responsible for what narrative interpretations of the past will eventually look like. But it is wrong to over-estimate this state of affairs and — as some of the more extreme adherents of a coherence theory of truth tend to do — to conclude from the impossibility of drawing an exact line between historical research and the narrative writing of history that the two should not be distinguished at all⁴. Historical practice itself offers sufficient argument against such an over-dramatic point of view. There are many historians who have an exclusive interest in historical research: they are concerned with establishing how cities or convents acquired legal or feudal rights, how historical monuments came to be erected, how diplomatic treaties came into being, they study the changes in the price of bread or the growth and decline in the population of different areas. Furthermore, this detective-like approach to the past is the essence of much work done in archaeology. On the other hand, there are the historians with a more synthetical turn of mind; to the best of their abilities they try to integrate the facts found by historical research into large over-all views of (parts of) the past. They are concerned not so much with the facts themselves or even with their correct interpretation as with the question of what might be the most acceptable representation or synopsis of parts of the past. Their problem is how the history of the past should be narratively written or which narratio proposes the best interpretation of (parts of) the past.

Everyone who only has a superficial knowledge of the historical trade will be able to tell these two kinds of historians apart and to distinguish between the sort of historical writing produced by each. The difference between most of the writing of a Trevor-Roper or a Talmon on the one hand and those learned dissertations of the Annales-school on the other are obvious to anyone, although I admit that there are historical studies which are hard to place in either class. But that is not an argument against the distinction: even though it is impossible to say where your neck ends and your body begins, this anatomical distinction is unexceptionable.

4. Oakeshott was such an extreme defender of the coherence theory of truth: he argued that our factual knowledge of the past (the concern of historical research) is just as much a construction of the historian as the narrative interpretation of historical facts (the concern of historical writing). See Oakeshott, Chapter III. This point of view leads to a blurring of the distinction between historical research and the narrative writing of history. A perceptive evaluation of Oakeshott's "constructivism" can be found in J.W. Meiland, *Scepticism and historical knowledge*, New York 1965, pp. 41-63.

Nearly all current philosophy of history is concerned with the philosophical problems of historical research (“what are historical facts?”, “how can facts be explained?”, “how do values influence the accounts given of historical facts?”) and we cannot fail to be impressed by the work done in this field. Certainly, current philosophy of history is a flourishing discipline and a number of recent studies have widened our knowledge of historical research in a most satisfactory way. Nevertheless, it is regrettable that the narrative writing of history has been neglected. This has been the first major motivation for the writing of this book. The other is that I believe the philosophical problems of the narrative writing of history to be more fundamental than current opinion allows. Unfortunately I cannot explain in this early stage of our inquiry why a philosophical analysis of the narrative writing of history is so important for a correct understanding of the nature of historical knowledge. In fact, this study is the best evidence I have to support this assertion. So, I ask the reader to postpone his judgment till the end of the book.

The attempt to analyze the narrative writing of history is of a relatively recent date. It has not always met with approval. I will now discuss a number of criticisms of the narrativist approach here. Firstly, it has been argued by Mandelbaum⁵ that a narrative representation of the past must necessarily confine itself to the sphere of intentional human action. And since the days of Hegel (or, rather, Bernard de Mandeville⁶) we know that much in human history cannot be adequately explained by referring exclusively to the motives and the intentions of individual human beings. Very often, perhaps even in most cases, historians describe or explain the past with the help of concepts and theories unknown to the historical agents themselves. I entirely agree. But I do not see why narrative historiography is not allowed to go beyond intentional human action. Although I can give

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5. Mandelbaum (1); Olafson, on the other hand, accuses a narrativist like Danto of excluding the sphere of intentional human action from narrative accounts of the past. He says that the historical agents whose actions are described in the narratio “cannot, after all, act in accordance with rules [i.e. the covering laws of the CLM-ist] that are formulated in terms that are unfamiliar or unintelligible” to those agents themselves; Olafson, p. 271.
 6. G.W.F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Weltgeschichte. Band I. Die Vernunft in der Geschichte* (Felix Meiner Verlag), Hamburg 1970, p. 88: “jener Zusammenhang enthält nämlich dies, dass in der Weltgeschichte durch die Handlungen der Menschen noch etwas anderes überhaupt herauskomme, als sie bezwecken und erreichen, als sie unmittelbar wissen und wollen. Sie vollbringen ihr Interesse; aber es wird noch ein Ferneres damit zustande gebracht, das auch innerlich darin liegt, aber das nicht in ihrem Bewusstsein und ihrer Absicht lag”. And in his B. de Mandeville, *The fable of the bees; or private vices, public benefits*, London 1729, Mandeville already focused his attention on the unintended consequences of our actions. It is one of the miracles of modern philosophy of history that this old and venerable argument — which is clearly fatal to hermeneutic theory and all its modern successors (e.g. Collingswood’s “re-enactment”, Dray’s “action rationale explanation” and the Ideological explanations canvassed by Von Wright and Martin) — has never seriously been dealt with by philosophers standing in the hermeneutic tradition.

here only a very rough definition of the scope of narrative philosophy it is perfectly safe to say that narrative philosophy studies the question of how historians integrate a great number of historical facts into one synthetical whole (e.g. “the Industrial Revolution” or “the Cold War”). There is no reason whatsoever why these “historical facts” should be restricted to what went on in the heads of individual historical agents. Anyway, in this book a type of narrativist philosophy is evolved in which such a restriction is never made. And I should like to add that a narrativist philosophy as propounded here is even quite inimical to the kind of hermeneutic tendencies of which it is accused by Mandelbaum.

In a recent book Mandelbaum mentioned another difficulty he supposed to be inherent in the narrativist approach. Narrativism, he says, suggests that research is not necessary for writing history. His argument seems to be that narrative accounts can only be given of *fictitious* events. It is certainly true that narrativist philosophy does not investigate the question of how historical events can be established, this being the department of the philosophy of historical research. But this does not in anyway commit narrative philosophy to the view that the historian is free to fabricate his historical events. Mandelbaum’s critique of narrativist philosophy is all the more astonishing because in the remainder of his book he comes closer to it than most contemporary philosophers of history⁷.

A somewhat similar argument has been put forward by L.J. Goldstein. He distinguishes between the “superstructure” and the “infrastructure” in historical writing⁸. The term “superstructure” refers to the narrative form historical accounts of the past usually have; the term “infrastructure” refers to the totality of research-techniques the historian applies in his analysis of the past. All progress in historiography has been due to evolutions in the infrastructure, Goldstein says, while the superstructure has by and large been left unchanged since the days of Thucydides. And this leads Goldstein to conclude that for the philosopher of history only an inquiry into the infrastructure can be of any real interest. I do not agree. If the narrative form in which the historian casts his accounts of the past is not subject to change it seems fairly obvious to me that this narrative form must be an important clue to the nature of historical knowing.

There is another objection to narrative philosophy that causes somewhat more trouble. It is pointed out that so-called “narrative historiography” is only a small and out-dated part of historiography. Books such as Huizinga’s *Herfsttij der Middeleeuwen* or Braudel’s famous *Méditerranée* do not provide a story, or narrative, in the proper sense of the word⁹. If even such books no longer have a narrative character, the same can certainly be expected to apply to present problem-orientated historical literature. This

7. Mandelbaum (3), p. 25; in his L.O. Mink, Maurice Mandelbaum. The anatomy of historical knowledge, *History and theory* (1978) 211-223, Mink has shown convincingly how close the substance of Mandelbaum's book really is to the narrative approach to history. See also Ankersmit (2).

8. Goldstein, Chapter V.

9. Dray (2); Ely et. al.

objection is not so much wrong as misdirected. It arises from the misleading associations which, admittedly, the term “narratio” may call to mind. Many people when hearing the word “narratio” primarily think of historiography modelled on the kind of writing produced in literary fiction and are inclined to think that books like Stendhal’s *La Chartreuse de Parme* or Dickens’ *David Copperfield* are the ideal types of narrative fiction and most clearly show what narrative structures are. Consequently, narrative historiography is easily associated in particular with biographies or books on the history of diplomatic relations and military feats. It is argued, then, that most modern historiography studies problems regarding the character of a specific historical period, whereas narrativist philosophy can at most hope to explain the more old-fashioned kind of historical writing in which some diachronic development is described. However, in the analysis which I shall try to develop, it is precisely this modern, non-story telling, so-called “cross-sectional” approach to history that will turn out to be most in conformity with narrativist philosophy. The main reason for this curious situation is that narrativist philosophy is more interested in the (logical) nature of the linguistic entities we use in discussing the past (such as “nations”, “intellectual movements” or “climates of opinion”) than in how the path of a nation or intellectual movement through time should be described. And, of course, we should first know what kind of thing “the Renaissance” or “the French nation” is, before we can describe its historical evolution. Consequently, narrativist philosophy has more affinity with studies of the Renaissance or of the Enlightenment than with, for instance, histories of England between 1688 and 1832.

My critic might entirely reverse his argument and accuse narrativist philosophy of neglecting the kind of historiography that studies diachronic developments. As I suggested above, my answer to this objection will be that the results of narrativist philosophy are a necessary preliminary to a solution of the philosophical problems raised by this “developmental” historiography. As will become clear in due time (especially in Chapters V and VI), narrativist philosophy is very well capable of providing such a solution. To sum up, whenever in this book the terms “narratio” and “narrative substance” are to be used, all associations with the *belles-lettres* and with a story-telling kind of historiography should be avoided. I shall use these terms as synonymous with “historical interpretation”; a narratio is supposed to develop a thesis on the past, or to propose a certain “point of view” from which the past should be seen. Since such theses, interpretations or “points of view” always require a narratio for their exposition, I describe my investigation as an investigation of the historical narratio.

(2) *Objections to Psychologism.* Another possible objection to our attempt to establish a narrative logic is that the narratio can only be analyzed scientifically, that is to say, by strictly limiting the investigation to what happens at the linguistic, psychological or sociological level, when narratios are used as a medium for communication between people. This is largely the position taken up by such narrativists as Gallie, Louch, Perelman, Hexter, Toliver or Struever. Gallie is probably the most outspoken defender of this

attitude towards the narratio. He is interested exclusively in the conditions for optimal communication between the historian and his public. According to Gallie a historical narratio is successful, if the historian succeeds in “pulling” the reader along all the contingent facts related in the narratio, by making clever use of our “basic inter-human feelings”¹⁰. Gallie, like the other narrativists just mentioned, sees the narratio only as a medium for transmitting a message by adroitly putting into motion some psychological machinery in the reader’s mind (i.e. his “basic inter-human feelings”). He is not interested in the narratio itself, but merely in the workings of some psychological mechanism in the reader’s mind and more particularly in the question as to which ways and means the historian should choose to make the wheels of this mechanism go round. Gallie offers no analysis of what the narratio actually is and he only attempts to show how narrative communication *works*. He is, therefore, like the electrical engineer who, having been asked to explain the technical details of the telephone, restricts himself to indicating how the telephone should be operated.

We recognize a similar line of argument in Louch’s views on the narratio. He wants the historian to offer to his public a “proxy-experience” of the past; or, in other words, the historian should give his reader a surrogate of his own experience of the past. The words, or rather the narrations that the historian uses to that end, are “like hooks that pull [historical] reality into language”¹¹. Essential to the narratio is therefore its *evocative* nature; the narratio provides an “evocation” rather than a description of the past. How can this evocation of the past be achieved? In answering this question, Louch draws attention to the fact that historians often characterize individuals, groups or nations by means of terms like “aggressive”, “cunning”, “friendly” and so on. When using such terms the historian not only describes past reality, but also awakens in us experiences which we commonly associate with terms like “aggressive”, “cunning” etc. Our memories of these past experiences are the building-blocks from which every successful “evocation” of the past is constructed. Thus, historical language not only conveys descriptive information; it is also — and that is by far its most important task — a kind of intermediary instrument, external to both the historian and his public, which makes the wheels of the psychological mechanism in the mind of the listener or reader go round in such a way that this mechanism produces an “image” or an “evocation” of the past. And in this connection Louch likens historiography to caricatures. Do we not all prefer a caricature of some well-known person by Levine to a photography? If the photograph corresponds with the purely descriptive representation of the past, and the caricatural exaggeration with the “evocative” part in the historian’s representation of the past, then we may conclude that the latter is the most essential element in the writing of history. For whoever puts absolute trust in the descriptive element of a caricature is in for an unpleasant surprise. And

10. Gallie, p. 45.

11. Louch, p. 62.

we may also be sure that each inquiry into historical knowing and the nature of narrative must necessarily be an inquiry into how an “evocation” of the past can be constructed out of what we commonly associate with terms like “aggressive”, “cunning”, “friendly” and so on¹².

There are, I think, a number of misconceptions in this narrativist theory. Firstly, the historian can never give a “proxy-experience” of the past because not even the historian has actually experienced the past itself. He has worked with his sources, his documents and so on, but these are not the past itself. So Louch’s analysis of the task of the historian is based on his confusing the past itself with its documentary relics. As, however, it is very well conceivable for a writer to give an “evocation” of an event at which he was not present, this objection only proves that the term “proxy-experience” was improperly used and not that it would be impossible to “evocate” the past. Secondly, in order to stress the “evocative” element of the narratio, Louch pointed out that there is a similarity between the work of a caricaturist and that of a historian. However, the difference between the two is vital. We admire a caricature because it strikingly characterizes the original physiognomy that we are familiar with. But we do not know the past. Or rather - to continue Louch’s metaphor - we know it, but only from caricatures. And if we were to know a face only from caricatures we would be in no position to judge which one is the best. Thirdly, and this is a more important point, the associations connected with words like “aggressive”, “cunning” or “friendly” will differ from person to person. Therefore, a particular narratio may produce in the mind of a reader an “evocation” quite different from what the historian intended to convey. Hence, in order to avoid ambiguities, the historian should restrict himself exclusively to factual, descriptive language. Moreover, there is another difficulty. Even if we assume a general agreement among all people on the “evocative” value of terms like “aggressive”, “cunning” and so on (that is, all readers have exactly the same associations when they read these terms), how can we know that they are correctly used? In other words: to what aspects of (things in) the past that cannot be rendered in purely descriptive terms does the “evocative” component in these terms correspond? I do not think it will be easy for Louch to answer this question without abandoning the essence of his analysis.

12. Psychologistic tendencies can also be found in the writings of J.H. Hexter. Thus he writes that the historian must always bear in mind who his readers are in order to be most successful in "the reorganization of their thinking"; see J.H. Hexter, *The history primer*, New York 1971, p. 144. However, due to the extreme looseness of his argument, it is hard to say with precision how far Hexter ventures in the direction of psychologism. The tendency so characteristic of psychologism to translate questions on the narratio itself into questions on the communication between the historian and his audience is also manifest in Perelman (2). The same is true for Toliver, pp. 3-70 and for recent attempts to assimilate historiography and rhetorics, e.g., N. Struever, *Topics in history, History and theory*, Beiheft 19 (1980) 66-8.

But let us leave the caricatures for what they are and return to the central issue. Nearly all psychologicistic interpretations of the narratio, that of Louch included, are based on a most peculiar conception of the nature of (narrative) language. Louch tends to regard (narrative) language as a mere medium between the historian and his public, a medium itself devoid of cognitive content. Cognitive content only comes into being at the moment that the language-medium successfully plays the “keyboard” of the mind. Indeed, to pursue the musical metaphor, there is a strong tendency to liken language to musical notation. (Narrative) language is held to be a notation system and not a descriptive system: it is supposed to consist of a series of signs (not having a meaning themselves in the way (strings of) words have a meaning) that evoke certain images in the mind just as the notes of a musical score invite us to produce noises of a particular pitch and duration. The resulting cognitive content is believed to reside on the side of the mind (of listener and speaker) and definitely not on that of the merely intermediary (narrative) language; similarly, a melody can only be *heard* and not *seen* (although some musically gifted people can follow a melody by just looking at the musical score; but even what these people see is not a pleasure for their eyes but for their “mental” ears). This tendency to confuse (narrative) language with a notation system, like musical notation, is one of the fundamental weakness of the psychologicistic approach. For there is an essential difference between the two; (narrative) language itself possesses cognitive content on account of its capacity to *describe* reality — e.g. the music we hear — while the musical notation only *denotes* the music played. The musical score is a kind of manual or guide: it tells you to do all sorts of things (and all of them in a certain way) so that the result will be something that is pleasing to the ear. But manuals or guides are not descriptions of the results of the actions recommended in them. Musical scores are not descriptions of music. Consequently, the psychologicistic approach to the narratio rests on a mistaken view of (narrative) language in that it ignores its descriptive function in favour of its alleged notational character. We can reformulate this critique of the psychologicistic account of the narratio as follows. Psychologicistic narrativist philosophy dissociates narrative language itself from the knowledge we acquire when hearing narrative language: narrative language does not contain knowledge itself but only stimulates its developments in our minds. Narrative language is likened to the electrical impulses in a telephone that cause the production of the sounds of human voices while not being these sounds themselves. But this is wrong; having knowledge (of the past) is having knowledge (of the past) as it is formulated in narrative language and this narrative language is not a mere intermediary power. When you have read a narratio, you have read a narratio and that is all there is to it.

Before adducing a general argument against all attempts to analyze the narratio from a psychologicistic perspective, I wish to make a short remark on terminology. At the beginning of this section I said that the scientific

approach to the narratio can proceed from different perspectives, viz. linguistic, sociological, psychological and so on, or combinations of them such as socio-linguistics or psycho-linguistics. I take the liberty of lumping all these variants together under the general heading “psychologicistic” — not because I consider the psychologicistic approach to be better or worse than the others, but simply because in the literature the psychologicistic element occurs more frequently than any of the others. Moreover, I should make it clear that my aim is not to suggest that the psychologicistic study of the narratio is inveterately wrong and cannot produce useful insight. On the contrary, I am convinced that it will provide us with a lot of interesting details about how narrative language is actually used and how it is influenced by all kinds of cultural, psychological or sociological determinants. It comes close to the study of rhetorics which is, I believe, a most appropriate study to enable us to understand to what degree the (narrative) use of language is tied up with political, ethical or — to use the very best word in this connection — “practical” arguments and stratagems.

However, mere common sense shows that the psychologicistic approach can never tell us the whole story of the narratio. Let us suppose that there is a reader R who — unlike all other known readers — is incapable of understanding a particular narratio (let us not be difficult here about the meaning of the verb “to understand” and take it in its ordinary, generally accepted sense). Confronted with the case of R the psychologist can do nothing but conclude that the empirical psychological laws that made him expect or even predict that R would understand that particular narratio are apparently false. He will therefore have to refine his laws in such a way that they also apply to the case of R. But that is not our normal reaction in such a situation: we would simply say that R *ought* to have understood the narratio submitted to him. This we can only do on the assumption (not necessarily shared by the psychologist — and even rejected by him when he studies the narratio as a psychologist) — that there are a number of narrativist rules, that enable us to write and to interpret narratios. Of course, the psychologist might argue that common sense is apparently a poor guide and that we have no right to say that a reader ought to understand a narratio which every normal person understands.

But such a heroic move would lead to absurd results. Not being permitted to say that someone *ought* to understand a narratio entails that we are never sufficiently justified in saying that someone (including ourselves) in fact *does* understand a narratio. To judge whether a reader understands a certain narratio we obviously need a test and we stipulate that a reader understands this narratio if and only if he is capable of giving the correct answer contained in the test. But the psychologist cannot tolerate such tests. According to him, the only thing we know is that there are narratios, understood or interpreted by different persons in different ways; and all one can do is try to find a maximum of regularity in all this. Therefore, he must condemn these tests as purely arbitrary norms (for why this particular test and not any others?) and by rejecting such “arbitrary norms” (as embodied in the tests) he forbids us to say a) that

someone *ought* to have understood a narratio and b) that someone actually ever *has* understood a narratio. And that is patently absurd.

There is however one requirement of a psychologistic character — which will be specified in a moment - which also belongs to the domain of narrative logic and thus has to be mentioned. Can a solitary person tell narratios? I will not enter into subtleties concerning the possibility or impossibility of “private languages” — anyway, if the solitary person cannot consistently use a language our problem does not even pose itself. It is certainly true that we, who participate in a language-using community, are capable of telling narratios to ourselves, although we may not often do so. So our problem is not whether we can do this when we are alone because no reasonable person will doubt this, but whether a solitary person can tell narratios (and *if* he does, he tells them, of course, to himself). I presume that we must answer this question in the negative.

I have suggested already that there are certain rules for the construction of narratios, whose nature I intend to examine in this study. Whatever we may be able to show these rules to be, that they exist is self-evident: we cannot just say *anything* at a given stage of a narratio. These rules (whatever their nature) guide us when we feel tempted to insert a particular statement in our narratio but then realize that we should leave it out if we want to construct an intelligible narratio. In the case of a solitary person, such a conflict between what he wants to say and what he *can* say — if he desires to be intelligible — can never arise. He will understand whatever he wants to say — supposing he is not a fool. So our rules do not apply in the case of the solitary person. He “lives” his rules, so to speak; he has his own “rules”, which do not possess the objective existence that we can attribute to the kind or rules that we, as participants in a language community, apply when telling a narratio. This fact has also been observed by Michel Tournier in his *Vendredi ou les Limbes du Pacifique*, a book that contains a number of brilliant insights into the logical and psychological consequences of living in solitude. Tournier describes how Robinson arms himself against the mental disintegration that constantly threatens him when he lives all by himself on his desert island. One of the dangers Robinson has to face is his slackening grip on language: “j’ai beau parler sans cesse à haute voix, ne jamais laisser passer une réflexion, une idée sans aussitôt la proférer à l’adresse des arbres ou des nuages, je vois de jour en jour s’effondrer des pans entiers de la citadelle verbale dans laquelle notre pensée s’abrite et se meut familièrement, comme la taupe dans son réseau de galeries. Des points fixes sur lesquels la pensée prend appui pour progresser — comme on marche sur les pierres émergeant du lit d’un torrent — s’effritent, s’enfoncent. Il me vient des doutes sur le sens des mots qui ne désignent pas des choses concrètes. Je ne puis parler qu’à la lettre. La métaphore, la litote et l’hyperbole me demandent un effort d’attention démesuré dont l’effet inattendu est de faire ressortir tout ce qu’il y a d’absurde et de

convenu dans ces figures de rhétorique”¹³. Thus, we may conclude that necessary condition for stories, narratios etc. is that the person who tells them does not lead a solitary life, or, at least, that he does have the memory of a social form of life.

Apart from this single point where the psychological and the logical analyses advanced in this book overlap, these approaches differ widely. I have chosen for the logical approach. Consequently, I will omit what has been written on the narratio by psycholinguists or French structuralists who try to find the empirical laws that govern the construction of actual narratios. Narrative logic attempts to give a description of narrative structures that ought to be acceptable even if the first narratio still had to be written. And this is an appropriate place to add that, in conformity with this logical approach to the narratio, epistemological questions will rarely be taken into account. I will assume for the remainder of this book that states of affairs in the past can be unambiguously described by means of constative statements. I am very well aware of the objections that could be raised regarding this assumption, but I don't think this is of any consequence for narrative logic.

(3) *The Narratio and the Historical Novel*. In the preceding pages I have used the words “story”, “narrative”, and “novel” rather loosely. From now on I will use the technical term “narratio” to indicate solely the historiographical, narrative representation of the past. The narratio is a linguistic entity essentially different from other coherent systems of sentences such as poems, novels, sermons, mathematical proofs and so on. Therefore the historiographical narrative representation of the past has an undeniable right to a name of its own. In order to point out the difference between the narratio on the one hand and poems, sermons etc. on the other, I will not undertake the Herculean task of comparing the narratio with all these other literary forms. Nearest to the narratio is the novel and amongst all kinds of novels it is, of course, the historical novel that comes closest to the narratio. So if we succeed in drawing a line of demarcation between the historical narratio and the historical novel, we may safely say that we have isolated the narratio from all other forms of narrative literature. I will not, however, attempt to give a precise definition of what a historical novel is. The reader may come to his own conclusion; he may draft a definition of the historical novel that puts it as close to the historical narratio as he wants to: nevertheless, I hope to be able to show where the difference lies.

On the face of it, it does not appear to be difficult to draw the line of demarcation. Unfortunately it turns out to be depressingly hard to find a formal justification for our intuitions. Before proceeding, we are well advised to consider the following methodological points. Of course, there are a great number of narratives we can all agree to label either “narratios” or “historical novels”. This confronts us with a choice between two strategies: a) we can be content with an investigation and a careful

13. M. Tournier, *Vendredi ou les limbes du Pacifique*, Paris 1972; p. 68.

reconstruction of our actual use of these two labels, b) we can try to find some independent criterion for a distinction between the two narrative *genres* that explains our actual use of these labels. There is yet another consideration. The borderline between the two *genres* may be very unstable. It may therefore be useful to establish a scale in such a manner that each individual narratio or novel corresponds with a particular point on that scale. If, for instance, on the left side of the scale we put the historical novels and on the right the narratios, historical novels in which the purely historiographical component is more prominent than in others shall be placed a little closer to the centre of the scale. Something similar could be done for narratios (think of Golo Mann's book on Wallenstein). Again, we can choose: a) we can be content with providing each narratio or historical novel with its appropriate place on the scale and declare that it would be nonsense to look for a zero point, a particular point, that is, that marks the exact distinction between narratios and historical novels, b) we can hope that it will be possible to establish where zero lies on the scale. It requires little effort to see the parallelism between these two methodological considerations. In both cases, option a) implies choosing for a "phenomenological" approach: no more can or should be done than just register the actual use of the terms "narratio" and "historical novel". Option b) tries to find a rationale behind this actual usage.

I prefer option b) to option a), not because I believe option a) to be wrong but because I consider it to be insufficient. Firstly, option a) has a built-in tendency to lapse into circular arguments of the type "this is a historical novel (or narratio as the case may be) simply because that is what we call it". Secondly, even if option a) were to establish successfully the distinguishing marks of the historical novel and the narratio, we may remain dissatisfied. A relatively untechnical person may correctly use the terms "gasoline motor" and "Diesel motor" on the basis of some easily observable differences between these two engines, but nevertheless be quite unaware of the real differences between them. What I am looking for is not some fact about our actual use of language, but about the nature of two narrative *genres*. Although, admittedly, actual usage will have to be our compass in this search.

An obvious answer to our question is that the narratio is true to fact, while fiction, and in particular the historical novel, is not. This view has been defended, among others, by Collingwood. He wrote: "As works of imagination, the historian's work and the novelist's do not differ. Where they do differ is that (....) the novelist has a single task only: to construct a coherent picture, one that makes sense. The historian has a double task: he has both to do this, and to construct a picture of things as they really were and of events as they really happened"¹⁴. The problem - as Scholes and Kellogg have already pointed out is that there are several layers of truth in a narrative work (the word "truth" is used here in an unsophisticated way — not until Chapter III will the concepts "truth/falsity

14. Collingwood (1); p. 246.

of the narratio" be scrutinized thoroughly). Firstly, there is the elementary level of the "recording of specific fact" and, secondly, Scholes and Kellogg claim the existence of the level of "the representation of generalized types of actuality"¹⁵. A historical novel — being fiction — does not tell the truth at the elementary level, but may give a quite reliable representation of those generalized types of actuality of a certain historical period. Anatole France's well known historical novel *Les Dieux ont Soif* is a good example. The principal character, the young man Evariste Gamelin, is of course fictitious (first level), but France's portrayal of the revolutionary mentality (second level) is excellent. Moreover, it has even been held - and not implausibly - that the historical novelist, not being checked by the historian's obligation to be cautious and also having a larger range of literary expedients at his disposal, is often in a better position to say true things about the past than the historian. This is no doubt the kernel of truth in Aristotle's famous dictum that poetry is truer than history. Thus, in some cases (not all, of course) we cannot distinguish between the narratio and the historical novel when we limit ourselves to the second level mentioned by Scholes and Kellogg. We may hope, then, that the truth-criterion will be more helpful when applied to the first level.

But even here difficulties arise. Due to an inaccurate reading of the historical documents, a historian's narratio may contain false statements, while on the other hand, a historical novel - say on Napoleon - will doubtlessly contain many true statements on Scholes's and Kellogg's first level. So even on this level the truth-criterion leaves us in the cold. Of course one could point out that historical novels contain many more false statements than narratios. We could try, then, to distinguish between the two narrative *genres* by taking into account the percentage of false statements each of them contains. It may turn out, if we follow this approach, that in all the narratives we call narratios this percentage never exceeds 10%. Have we now found our criterion? Unfortunately we haven't, for it is very well possible that a future book on history produced in some Communist country will score as high as even 15%. And it is even more disturbing to imagine that one day some historical novel may be written with no more than 5% false statements. We may conclude that replacing the truth-criterion with the percentage-criterion will not enable us a) to always distinguish correctly between narratios and historical novels and b) to locate our zero point on the scale.

There is, however, a way out for the truth-criterion. In many historical novels fictitious persons, situations and so on are introduced. There are two theories for determining the truth-value of statements on fictitious things. According to Russell, such statements are simply false; Strawson in a well-known article, has argued that they are neither true

15. Scholes & Kellogg; p. 87. In fact, Scholes & Kellogg identified *three* levels: (1) "recording specific fact" (2) "what resembles specific fact" and (3) "the representation of generalized types of actuality"; since the distinction between (1) and (2) is of no consequence for our investigation, I have combined them in level (1).

nor false — they simply have no truth-value¹⁶. If we prefer Russell's theory, the prospects of the truth-criterion remain as bad as they were: both narratios and historical novels then only consist of false and true statements and our discussion of the percentage-criterion has shown that the truth-criterion has no chance of success in such a situation.

Strawson's theory however is more promising: it shows that whereas 'narratios' only 'contain' 'true' and 'false' statements, 'the historical novel also contains statements without a truth-value. Thus, if we find statements without a truthvalue in a particular narrative it is a historical novel and if not, it is a narratio. So far so good. However, we should note that all we have actually achieved is a translation of the truth-criterion into what one might call a "reference-criterion". The narrative itself does not explicitly say whether a statement has no truth-value: we have to know historical reality in order to find out about that. Of course, it is highly unlikely that Anatole France's historical novel on the life and times of Evariste Gamelin should correspond with historical reality. But it is a matter of mere contingency if it does not. Moreover, we must realize that it is the task of the historical novelist to see to it that his story corresponds with historical fact as much as possible. Indeed, it is not at all improbable that during the French Revolution there were young men who resembled Evariste Gamelin in all relevant respects; their names just happened to be different and the things Gamelin did were done by them in an only slightly different way. Here, our truth-criterion wears very thin: the historical novel and the narratio are indistinguishable when their cognitive core is taken into consideration. Only if we look at the insignificant, circumstantial details does the historical novel have statements without a truth-value, while such statements are absent from the narratio. If this is all we can achieve, we may rightly feel disappointed.

I will now offer one conclusive argument against the truth-criterion. Suppose one day the historical novelist Panomphaios were to write a historical novel on Louis XX (and let us assume Louis XX was really King of France somewhere in the 19th century). A few years after the publication of this historical novel a great number of forgotten documents on Louis XX and his reign are discovered in the Bibliothèque Nationale. In these documents an enormous number of details of Louis' life have been summed up by careful and reliable chroniclers. One of the greatest discoveries is that Louis XX, apparantly a diligent observer of his own mental life, has left us a diary revealing his daily broodings during a period that covers a substantial part of his life. This diary has been analyzed by psycho-historians who, subsequently, have come to the conclusion that Louis XX was the kind of person to speak the truth and nothing but the truth in his diary. The most remarkable thing is, however, that with the help of these forgotten documents it was possible

16. P.F. Strawson, On referring, in G.H.R. Parkinson ed., *The theory of meaning*, Oxford 1976.

to prove that each of the constative statements in Panomphaios' historical novel was true. All this is of course highly improbable. But suppose now that Panomphaios wrote exactly the same historical novel not before but after the discovery of the documents and used them as evidence for each statement in his novel. Such a situation is not so hypothetical; in fact, I believe it to be possible to write a historical novel on Louis XIV in which all statements are drawn from the Duke of Saint-Simon's *Mémoires*. Anyway, both Panomphaios' narratives, the one he wrote before the discovery as well as the one after the discovery, are undoubtedly historical novels. Thus we can conceive of historical novels in which all the statements are true. And this forces us to reject the truth-criterion. To this one might object that Panomphaios' narratives are no longer historical novels but narratios because they contain only true statements. It will be obvious that such an argument rests on a prejudgement of the question that is here *sub judice*.

Having rejected the truth-criterion, we may consider Beardsley's proposal for distinguishing between the historical novel and the narratio. According to his so-called "non-assertion theory of fiction" the propositions of the (historical) novel, in contrast with the propositions of a narratio, are not asserted by the author of the (historical) novel. There are a variety of well-known conventions by which this fictional non-assertive use of language can be signalled. For instance, the author may "label his story a "novel", a "romance" (....) and these are ways of canceling its assertiveness, even if it is believable"¹⁷. Also very effective in ruling out assertiveness are reports on states of affairs "no one in so-called real life could possibly know"¹⁸. Indeed, there is an "authoritative way of telling" things typical of the (historical) novel. Yet I don't think that Beardsley's criterion will be more helpful to us than the truth-criterion. We may well imagine some mystifying author who has carefully omitted every signal of non-assertive language from his historical novel. Such authors do exist. Should we then decide that these authors write history (albeit very bad history) or that they are historical novelists all the same? If we opt for the latter we can only do so by using the truth-criterion rejected by both Beardsley and ourselves.

Implicit in Beardsley's argument is the suggestion that we should consider the intentions of the author. We could radicalize this suggestion into the following proposal for demarcating narratios from historical novels: the author of the narratio intends to speak the truth; although he may not always succeed, his narrative is *meant* to be true. Novelists, however, have no such intentions. I have two; objections to this proposal. Firstly, actions are not always a continuation of our intentions. But I admit that it is hard to imagine an] author who intends to write a historical novel while actually producing a narratio, or vice versa. More important is the second objection: we were looking for the differences between instances of

17. Beardsley (I); p. 421.

18. W.C. Booth, *The rhetoric of fiction*, London 1973; p. 3.

two narrative *genres*. As soon as we have to consider the intentions of the author in order to come to a decisive conclusion regarding which is which, the outcome will be that the two narrative *genres* themselves cannot provide us with sufficient criteria for making the distinction. Since it is precisely the latter kind of criteria we are looking for we ought to abstain from having recourse to the intentions of authors.

This brings us back to where we were at the very beginning of this section. I propose to examine once again Scholes' and Kellogg's two levels of truth discernible in historical novels as well as, as I would like to add now, in narratios: the lower level of factual statements on particular occurrences and situations and the level of general comments on the nature of a certain historical period. It is certainly not easy to indicate where the first level begins and where the other ends but their existence is beyond doubt.

On the general level the likeness between the historical novel and the narratio is evident: in both cases we are dealing with generalized knowledge of (an aspect of) some historical period. However, there are two differences. Firstly, and most conspicuously, the writer of a narratio is engaged in building up historical knowledge, in gaining or acquiring it. His discourse is expositive and argumentative; the historical novelist, on the other hand, *applies* this general historical knowledge to one or more particular (imaginary) historical situations. The difference between the narratio and the historical novel is exactly the same as the difference between theoretical and applied science (this, incidentally, shows why the truth-criterion turned out to be ineffective: it is impossible to distinguish theoretical from applied science by resorting to criteria of truth). The second difference lies in the different ways in which the two levels of truth are related to each other in either the narratio or the historical novel. In the narratio the first level leads up to the second: it furnishes the evidence and the illustrations for a comprehensive interpretation of (an aspect of) a historical period (the first level). In the historical novel the reverse happens. The author of the historical novel who knows the major textbooks is in possession of "general" historical knowledge before he proceeds to "materialize" this "general" knowledge into particular, individual cases. If he is a good historical novelist he executes this "substitution-process" so adroitly that the intrinsically alien traces of such "general" knowledge - that is, the whole of level one — completely disappears from direct perception. He does not mention his "general" historiographical knowledge explicitly: it should only show itself in the words and acts of his characters. Just as the laws of mechanics "show" themselves in a well-constructed bridge, so does the historical novel just "show" historical knowledge without expressing it.

A third difference can be derived from the preceding considerations. Very often fictitious personages provide the historical novelist with the entities to which "general" historical knowledge can be applied. He starts with an "empty" human being, a kind of "homunculus"; this "homunculus" is given substance a) by confronting him with the problems of life and b) by

working out his answers to these problems using the knowledge the historical novelist possesses of human nature in general and of the historical period in which the “homunculus” is located. These “homunculi” tie the novelist’s narrative together: his descriptions of historical reality are organized from the “point of view” of these “homunculi”. Although at times a general account of historical reality may be given in a historical novel, the historical novel essentially shows us historical reality as seen through the eyes of (fictitious) people living in the past. *Their* interpretation of the past, *their* “points of view” on the socio-historical reality contemporary to them, guides the historical novelist’s exposition of the past. The narratio, on the other hand, is not written *from* a certain “point of view” on, or interpretation of the past, although some such interpretation or “point of view” is *proposed* in it. The “general” historical knowledge a narratio offers of (part of) the past is essentially the definition of a specific “point of view” from which we are invited to see the past (this thesis will be elaborated in Chapter VII); the historical novel furnishes examples of what one will actually see when applying such a “point of view” to a “homunculus” located in a certain historical period. The historian argues for “points of view” on the past, the historical novelist applies them.

It could be objected that just like the historical novel the narratio is always written from a certain “point of view”, because it has a certain subjectmatter. However, a narratio’s subject-matter and its “point of view” should not be identified with each other. Firstly subject-matters belong to the past itself, while “points of view” can only be found in history books. Secondly, a historian may choose the socio-economic aspects of the French Revolution as his subject-matter but by doing so he has not stated from what “point of view” he is inviting us to see historical reality. Only *interpretations* of these socio-economic aspects of the French Revolution or of their relevancy to the ideological and political struggle during the Revolution can properly be called “points of view” on (parts of) the French Revolution. Lastly, we are inclined to forget the distinction because historians often (tacitly) imply that what is described by them in their narratios (i.e. their subject-matter) is also essential for a correct understanding of (parts of) the past (and this is an interpretation of, or a “point of view” on the past). But, again, *what* is described is not a description itself. (I refer to Chapter VII, section (3) and (4) for an elaboration of the concept “point of view”.)

Historians construct and discuss “points of view”, but unlike historical novelists, they do not *start* from certain “points of view” when describing the past. In fact, (honest) historians never say, “if you accept my “point of view” you will have to admit that I am right; but now that you prefer your own “point of view”, you cannot possibly appreciate my representation of the past”. On the contrary, “points of view” are the central issues in historical discussions: one does not argue *from* them but *for* them. Generally speaking, “points of view” are always

conclusions and never arguments; at least, as long as rational discussion is believed to be instrumental in reaching the truth.

I hope to have determined with sufficient precision where zero point lies on our scale by means of these three closely related differences between the narratio and the historical novel. I am ready to admit that in individual books the two narrative *genres* may be mixed up. But just as a historian may occasionally choose to write in the novelist's manner (think again of Golo Mann's *Wallenstein*), so may a historical novelist wish to expound historical knowledge gained by himself or others in the way historians do (as in Thomas Mann's *Joseph und seine Brüder*, the presence of a narrator in a historical novel may introduce this historiographical component). But this is not an argument against the distinction made. On the contrary, our ability to identify alien elements in either historical novel or narratio has only been rendered possible thanks to our successful definition of the differences between the two *genres*. The discovery of zero point does not imply that every book is either to the left or to the right of it. Books should not be marked by points but rather by strokes on our scale.

(4) *Terminology*. Lastly, I should like to come to some agreement on the terminology to be used in this book. My proposals are largely derived from Geach's *Reference and Generality*. The terms *subject* and *predicate* will be used as linguistic terms: not things but their names will be logical subjects. Not properties but their verbal expressions (called *attributes*) will be predicates. However, predicates are true of things, not of their names.

Subjects and predicates are the two constituent elements of *statements* (or *propositions*); and a statement or a proposition is expressed by a *sentence* in an ordinary language. A number of ingenious theories have been developed, in particular by Geach, Strawson and Quine, as to what the exact grammatical and/or logical differences between subject and predicate are. I will not enter into this matter, and the reader may adhere to whatever theory he prefers.

Names and *definite* or *identifying descriptions* will be said to refer to things in reality. With regard to what things exist in reality I will adhere to the Quinean view. If we agree with Quine that a theory (or form of discourse) is ontologically committed "to those and only those entities to which the bound variables of the theory must be capable of referring in order that the affirmations made in the theory be true"¹⁹ and stipulate, furthermore, that we can refer to everything that exists, we will be permitted to refer to "objects" of which a definite description can only be given partly or exclusively by means of theoretical concepts (for instance, "this magnetical field", or "the GNP of nation N at t"). Predicates, on the other hand, will be said to *denote* what they are true of.

Every coherent system of sentences in an ordinary language (texts) will be either a narrative or a non-narrative text (sermons, statutes,

19. W.V. Quine, *From a logical point of view*, Cambridge 1971, p. 13-14.

libels, mathematical proofs). Every narrative text is either a narratio or it is not (poems, novels, epics, etc.); the line of demarcation between the two categories has been drawn in the preceding section. The narratio consists of sentences; I shall assume that all the sentences in the narratio show the prepositional structure and contain a subject and a predicate term. I admit that it can be plausibly doubted or even denied that narratios consist of only such sentences. There are a variety of sentences that do not show this prepositional structure, e.g. commands, propositions expressing scientific theories, propositions expressing identities, or - possibly²⁰ - containing relational predicates. I presuppose that these kind of sentences are not an essential ingredient in narratios and that all the relevant problems of the narratio can be studied satisfactorily when we consider only those sentences that show the prepositional structure. I am very well aware that this is an important decision. Unfortunately, I cannot justify it here. Only this book as a whole can do so: once the account of the narratio presented in this book proves to be acceptable this omission will be sufficiently justified. Lastly, I shall assume that the narratio contains *singular* statements only²¹.

A statement in a narrative text has the form “x is \emptyset ”. What is expressed by the statement written as “x is \emptyset ” will be called a *modification* (Leibnizian terminology). Taking the modification M (“x is \emptyset ”) we cannot say “M is a modification of x”, at least, not if we intend that to mean that M is a kind of predicate of x (and I do not see how we could interpret this sentence differently). We can speak of the “ \emptyset -ness of x”, or “x’s being \emptyset ”, we can even speak of the “x-eity of M” (in a way reminiscent of Scotus’s “haecceitas”), but not of the “M-ness of x”. M is not a property of x and “M” is not an attribute of x, because facts are not properties. However, the statements expressing facts will be said to be the properties of *narrative substances*. Narrative substances are the collections of those statements in a narratio that contain — in a way to be explained later on — the cognitive message of the narratio. When many statements in (part of) a narratio always have the same subject, this subject will be said to be the *narrative subject* of this (part of the) narratio.

20. It has been argued by Russell and many others that propositions containing relational predicates do not have the subject-predicate form. See Russell; p. 13.

21. So-called “limited generalizations”, i.e. generalizations which are restricted to specific times and places (e.g. “men wore wigs in Europe in the 18th century”) should be dissolved into singular, constative statements and not be seen as universal statements.